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FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY: A CHRISTIAN VIEW ON CYBER ETHICS

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FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY: A CHRISTIAN VIEW ON CYBER ETHICS

The following is an edited transcript of Daniel Lohrmann's lecture given on January 16, 2011, at the Center for Ethics and Public Life at Luther College in Decora, Iowa. Mr. Lohrmann was invited by Dr. John Moeller and Dr. Sören Steding as a part of Luther's interdisciplinary Paideia course on cyberethics.

I'd like to start with two questions.

First, how would you finish this sentence: the Internet is... That is, how would you briefly describe the Internet, or cyberspace, or the World Wide Web? Here are some of the popular answers I've heard:

1. **The Internet is the greatest invention since the printing press.** Billions of users sending trillions times trillions of bits. It is now my new TV, my phone, and my must-have mobile device. Cloud computing lets me access information at anytime from anywhere on the earth with my smartphone. We're heading for the Dick Tracy watch.
2. **The Internet is a wonderful tool.** It is infrastructure like a digital superhighway, a great multi-purpose communication device, quick access to specific news and sports, and more. It enables all of my new technologies to work together; it's like a glue that packages my weather and social networks sites like Facebook or Twitter.
3. **The Internet is fun—I can dream online.** The Web offers global gaming and virtual worlds. I love Halo, World of Warcraft, Counter-Strike, and other games. My friends and I constantly find interesting and new things to do, and I'm never bored online. In virtual reality, I enter Second Life and travel to distant places without leaving my house. I can see things that I've only dreamed of where I live. I interact with exciting, fun people from around the world despite my tight budget.
4. **The Internet is how I learn.** 21st century education is about distance learning. I do all my research online. I take classes in Arizona while sitting at home in Michigan. Or I just Google it. I multi-task. (PBS just did a new



segment on how young people multi-task today and how that affects the brain. Teenagers typically do math homework, chat with friends, download Facebook pictures, and write term papers, and watch videos, all at the same time.)

5. **Cyberspace offers new commerce.** I love shopping online. I buy stuff from Amazon or Walmart.com. (Christmas sales were up over 15% this year.) I can search for jobs online and find new career opportunities on the other side of the country that I only dreamed about a decade ago. I can even shop for jobs.
6. **The Internet is all about ministry.** My church, or soup kitchen, or non-profit group, or missions team does so much online, and we reach out to other cultures. We communicate with others on the front lines in Africa or Vanuatu over the Internet. Our fundraisers or calls-for action can touch thousands of families globally and raise millions of dollars for the needy. We can tell amazing stories people need to hear.

But others might say — Hold on a minute. Is the Internet really only a force for good? What about Internet predators, child porn, plagiarism, identity theft, or other online crimes? Some are afraid of the Internet and online banking. Or, others worry about “big brother” and predict that the book *1984* is coming true.

Perhaps these people would finish the sentence:

7. **The Internet is evil.** I know people who are afraid of cyberspace, not because they can't learn the technology or figure out how to use it, but because they fear the impact of being tempted, misled or even robbed online.
8. **The Internet forces Information Overload:** Too much data coming at me all at once I don't know what to listen to or who to trust anymore. The Web is really people connected by computers. But do I really know these people and are they being honest? Are they being paid to say that? What are their motives? Which blogs should I read and which ones should I ignore? I Google: “When did Columbus discover America?” and get different answers—if the top viewed sources even believe that Columbus discovered America at all.

I could go on and on:

9. **The Internet enables e-Government.** I can reserve campground, renew my driver's licenses or reserve a spot at a National Park campground online.
10. **Cyberspace feeds my cravings** for real-time sports and even fantasy sports teams.
11. **Or the Internet takes up too much of my time.** I can't seem to turn it off or find work/life balance.



So how would I finish the sentence?

The Internet is an accelerator, like the gas pedal in your car. The World Wide Web is making almost everything go faster. While radio and TV played this role in the 20th century, the Internet is swallowing both—offering podcasts and videos on demand. Messages that took months to deliver centuries ago can now be delivered instantly. But in our brave new web, what is “viral” online today is often old news a week from now.

Like a gas pedal, the Internet is benign. Not a force for good or evil, but both good and evil now wage their battles online in the 21st century. It is our newest battle front. Just as the printing press vastly expanded the spread of ideas through books and enabled the Renaissance and Reformation, the World Wide Web is creating a new e-Renaissance in numerous areas.

As Americans, we worry about such hot topics as unemployment, wars overseas, rising levels of debt, local education, global warming, and perhaps even WikiLeaks. And yet, unless you’ve been the victim of cyber crime or published a book online, you probably haven’t thought very much about how cyberspace is impacting your life—in both positive and negative ways. The Internet both defines and reflects the culture we live in.

Which leads me to my second question: Why should society care about cyber-ethics? But before I answer that question, I want to provide a few basic definitions...

» **Ethics** are the rules or standards that govern conduct.

How do I live my life and make my decisions? Everyone has ethics. One of the best ways of thinking about ethics is to take a quick look at what you believe and then think about how you would react when those beliefs are challenged. But to agree on ethics, we must agree on what is moral or the difference between right and wrong.

So, if ethics is the study of behaviors and conduct and how what I believe affects how I live, then what is cyber-ethics? In cyberspace, what’s allowed on your network? What do I actually do? Are your actions different online than offline?

I think this is a vital topic in the 21st century because the norm is to have different ethical standards or boundaries for online life. I frequently hear, “It doesn’t count the same” or “People do or say things online anonymously that they would never do face to face with someone in real life.”

Also: Who can I trust online and offline? Why? While many think cyberspace is separate or not as relevant, our online and offline lives are rapidly merging together as never before.



One person said this: “Ethics are something that you study and think about, or ethics can be a code of conduct that you follow and live by.” And while some people may think ethics are relative, Einstein said: “Relativity applies to physics, not ethics.”

To get at the heart of ethics, we need to talk about core values and worldviews. How do these things impact my life and actions?

The first answer is that society needs cyber-ethics to inform, protect and guide governments, businesses and families and individuals.

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Topics in cyber-ethics are closely related to cyber-security and Internet privacy issues around the globe. I have interviewed professionals in business and governments from South Africa to Moscow to all parts of the USA. Everyone is having problems online—but most label these as only cyber-security and privacy.

What are people worried about?

- » ID theft
- » Losing sensitive data
- » Malware (By the way, the USA is higher on the list of countries that are a source of malware than Russia, according to numerous sources.)
- » Spam, scams, and Nigerian emails

One example of this occurred a few years back where I work. State of Michigan Government e-mail boxes started filling up with messages entitled, “e-Card from your daughter.” The simple text in the message said, “Hey dad, check out this iTunes.”

This new spam was actually an ingenious method to infiltrate our network defenses by tempting users to click on the link. After analyzing what protections we employed, the attackers were able to bypass our state-of-the-art spam filters which already blocked over 90% of e-mails coming from the Internet.

Unfortunately, it worked. Over 200 state employees clicked on that link which secretly established unseen connections overseas and tried to infect the PCs with malware and steal personal information. But in this case, “Bat Man” came to the rescue. (Our security experts, who work in a restricted area that we’ve nicknamed the “Bat Cave,” were monitoring incoming and outgoing network traffic.) When alarms went off, they stopped the unauthorized connections to Asia and prevented any loss of sensitive information. They notified those who clicked on the link and got technicians to fix their PCs.



These types of attacks occur all the time in cyberspace.

From the Department of Defense in DC to issuing food stamps in Michigan to ManTech International in England, I've worked in or for governments for over 25 years. The stereotype is that "bad guys" were always external hackers, foreign governments, organized crime, or that geek kid down the street who tried to hack into the school's computer to change his grades.

One of the holiday season's top cyber-security stories was the phony White House Christmas e-card that was opened by a number of U.S., state and foreign government workers. It installed malicious executable code to search the victim's PC for documents and send them off to a server in Belarus.

But there is a BIG fallacy: protection is totally a technology issue; we just need a better black box and everything will be okay. The reality is that answers require people, process, and technology.

People and culture are the hardest to change. "Everyone is doing it" is tough to stop. The true core issues include motivations, ethics, values, and beliefs.

How do schools, governments, and businesses respond?

- » We issue policies, codes of conduct,
- » We block websites, encrypt laptops, force long passwords, etc.
- » We train people. Michigan has an excellent website and free training at www.michigan.gov/cybersecurity.

But many people still disobey the rules, in the same way that they exceed speed limits on roads.

So cyber-ethics is not just for kids. Adults test rules and lines just as often as teenagers. I've seen people run businesses at work, download porn, chat online all day with others instead of doing their real work, etc. The smarter people are with computers, the more they think they won't get caught.

We have many "Insider Threats," and they are perhaps just as much of a problem as external cyber threats. One great example of this is WikiLeaks.

Socrates says: "Living a just life is its own reward."

How are cyber-ethics different from other moral decisions we make every day? Many people have developed a different view of online life that the "real world." Some say cyberspace is "fake" or "doesn't count the same" for a variety of reasons. They justify stealing by claiming digital bits are "free" so we don't have the costs as when books are produced, DVDs are made, or magazines distributed. People



who would never even consider stealing a pack of gum at a Walmart store have no difficulty in illegally downloading thousands of dollars worth of music and videos.

Put in other terms, I identify with the phrases “online integrity” or “virtual integrity” better than cyber-ethics.

Almost everyone wants to believe that they act with integrity. Integrity is what you do when no one else is watching. Or doing what you say and saying what you do. Online, there are many opportunities to be anonymous, which can be a good thing. However, it also means that people display duplicity and have multiple online identities that exhibit conflicting behaviors.

What does this look like?

Debra, a junior at a prestigious Ivy League university, downloads and submits someone else’s research. Trevor, a respected businessman, plugs a portable drive into his work laptop. Within seconds he’s secretly viewing inappropriate material. April and Sara, two twelve-year-old girls from Kansas, are pretending to be twenty-something “valley girls.” They think they are chatting with the interesting nineteen-year old hunk from Oregon in the picture. In reality, their online friend is a forty-three year old man who lives nearby. Abigail, a lonely mom, desperately misses her traveling husband. After stumbling across an old boyfriend online, her catching-up has become frequent flirting.

While each of these online interactions started in one part of cyberspace, they ended up in another. Initial good intentions somehow went astray. One by one, each will face serious consequences. Scenes like these are repeated millions of time each day online.

So we must ask how we encourage and enable the good and at the same time discourage or disable the bad. Of course, there are different opinions on what is good or bad.

SIDE NOTE:

What is the role of government?

- » 59% of voters say the government’s most important role is to protect their individual rights.
- » 24% believe a government’s primary purpose is to ensure fairness and social justice.
- » 10% say it’s to manage the economy.
- » Nearly half (48%) of American adults see the government today as a threat to individual rights rather than a protector of those rights.

Australia and China’s governments are blocking many websites to “protect society.” However, is this helping stop bad stuff online and helping families? Some think of it as “Big Brother.”



Some in society may think, “For my ethics, I’ll just follow the law.” And yet, they regularly exceed speed on the highways. Rarely do people just base their actions on the law alone.

The law (or school or work policy) tells us what we must do, while morality tells us what we ought to do.

Slippery Slope—One thing leads to another

Sow a thought, reap an act
 Sow an act, reap a habit
 Sow a habit, reap a lifestyle
 Sow a lifestyle, reap your destiny

Online life affects and reflects your character, reputation, job prospects and future much more than most people realize. I see it because I work with over 50,000 people every day.

I have seen people be disciplined, lose their jobs, pay fines, wreck their marriage, destroy their family, or even do jail time because of cyber-ethics. No one thinks it will happen to them.

Problems can happen to anyone, but few people think it will end up where it does when they start.

This is where our Christian faith informs us and connects with our online life. Good cyber-ethics (or online integrity) is the right thing to do.

A common assumption in America is that people will act according to what they believe is in their best interest. And yet, many know it is wrong to smoke and bad for their health—yet they still do it. While most support autonomy for everyone, do we really know what is best for us?

As a Christian, I believe that the Bible is true and provides the best answers regarding how to live. For example, Proverbs 10:9 says, “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.”

Psalm 111:10 says, “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom all who follow his precepts have good understanding.”

Martin Luther said,

“We are accustomed to admit freely that God is more powerful than we are, but not that he is wiser than we are. To be sure, we say that

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he is, but when it comes to a showdown, we do not want to act on what we say."

If integrity brings the best results, how can we apply this today?

Every generation works out the implications of God's Word in their time.

In this century, we have the Internet: it is the front line of the battle for good and evil, since this is where our thought life begins.

Christians can be a force for good in all the Internet positives we mentioned above: studying, communicating with Vanuatu, efficiency, online government, online classes, buying things, Christmas sales online, entertainment, etc.

But there is the dark side of the net. Secular society recognizes the need for training on ethics, but remember, Darth Vader was also well-trained. It is a spiritual battle. John 1 describes "light and darkness," but darkness will give way to the light. It starts with your thought-life. Cutting-edge temptations are now online. Ethical terms are being redefined online all the time.

How can Christians Balance Freedom and Responsibility Online?

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (Gal. 5:18)

In "The Freedom of a Christian Man," Luther said, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

Freedom is not the right to do as one pleases, but the power and capacity both to will and to do as one *ought*. True freedom is never freedom from responsibility, but responsibility not only for choice, but right choices. Freedom is an inner contentment with who we are in Christ and with what we have. It means desiring heavenly treasure.

And yet, we know we will fail. Sincere Christians still make mistakes and sin. We know there is forgiveness for online mistakes and the chance for a new beginning.

While Christians are not justified by what we do, what we do is a direct result of what we truly believe about God. We have a new motivation for living both online and offline.



Society will notice good ethics. Albert Einstein said after World War II: “When the Nazis came to power, I looked to the universities that prided themselves upon their intellectual freedom, and they failed me. I looked to the German press, which prided itself on the freedom of the press, and it failed me. Until at last the churches stood alone, and that for which I once had little regard earned my respect.”

A Model for Ethical Action Online

Surf your values. Know what you believe. Act on your convictions. It starts with offline values and apply them to online life. Remember Luther’s famous line

“I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

Acting on Biblically-based convictions, Luther changed the world! We can do the same today. The Bible says to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. We must know the threats and the risks in cyberspace.

True freedom is never freedom from responsibility, but responsibility not only for choice, but right choices.

- » **Be accountable.** Accountability is for winners. My family uses Covenant Eyes. My wife and friends get my Internet reports. And we see where our kids surf.
- » **Be a Cyber Ambassador for Good.** Whether at school, home, work, or wherever, help those around you. There is no “neutral” position in ethics.

Remember the best defense is a good offense. Fight for good. Keep the other team off the field.

2 Corinthians 5:20 says we are Christ’s ambassadors, as though God was making his appeal through us.

I have interviewed many cyber experts that told me that if they weren’t fighting for the good guys on government or business networks, they would probably be hackers. But they also tell me that fighting for good keeps them out of trouble.

At the start, I expressed my view that the Internet is like the accelerator in your car. If this is true, than cyber–ethics are the brakes. Our brakes:

- » Help us maneuver through tough online turns.
- » Understand how to reach the desired destination safely.



A teacher asked a class, “Why do we have brakes on a car?” A bunch of children raised their hands. One person blurted out, “To slow down!” Someone else said, “To stop!” The teacher paused, smiled and said quietly, “We need breaks so we can drive faster without crashing. Brakes allow us to arrive at our destination safely and in one piece.”

The same is true of cyber-ethics. We need these cyber brakes when we go online. Cyber-ethics can inform and transform how we navigate through cyberspace.

My hope and prayer is that you and your families will be motivated and equipped to surf your values with integrity.



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Dan is the author of *Virtual Integrity: Faithfully Navigating the Brave New Web*. Find out more about him at <http://www.virtualintegritybook.com>.



Net Safety Resources provides practical advice for Christians seeking to use the Internet with integrity. It was established in 2010 by Covenant Eyes and Dan Lohrmann.



White papers are available online at: <http://netsafetyresources.com/articles/>

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